

Speech Mayor Cohen at AABC, 22 April 2009

Thank you very much for your hospitality, for your kind words of friendship and for the possibility that the Expatcentre, which opened last year, may present itself.

Ladies and gentlemen,

As been said, we celebrate that 400 years ago Henry Hudson sailed up the river that since then bears his name. Pioneers from Amsterdam, settling in the Manhattan area, planted the seeds of democracy, entrepreneurial spirit, freedom of expression and freedom of religion in what we now know as New York, the unofficial capital of the free world.

Amsterdam and New York share a commitment to quality of life. Amsterdam and New York share the same DNA. We cherish our parks and public spaces, the places where people and ideas meet. We strive to be leaders in information and media technology and sustainable mobility. I'm happy to have seen that the joy and value of biking is also overtaking New York. As you might know the bike is almost attached to Amsterdammers at birth. And of course we are proud that inventive Dutch design has such transnational power.

But in the end it's not about our strength in design, innovation, or quality of life. It's about the magic of our cities.

Why is it that Amsterdammers and New Yorkers enjoy this wonderful combination of pride, awe and recognition upon entering each others cities? Everybody knows and feels it, and as to the why there are as many opinions as there are people. Or maybe in our cities, there are more opinions than people.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me cite Russel Shorto in his essay on the forgotten history of Hudson, Amsterdam and New York:

"The Dutch Republic in the 17th century pioneered concepts of business and trade, including the idea of shares of stock to reduce risk, as well as the notion of tolerance as a social glue to undergird a mixed society. Both of these features – free trade and an immigrant culture, took root in New Amsterdam, and then in New York. They ensured that as New York developed under English rule, it would be a very different place from Boston, Hartford or any other city in British North America.

The fruits of 17th century Amsterdam and New York are fully evident in the 21st century cities.

Turbans and yarmulkes, Cyrillic and Cantonese, turmeric and clove: the cityscape is a palette of tolerance. But is this not the palette of every modern city? Indeed it is, and there lies the larger point to be made: these features that Amsterdam in some way pioneered in the 17th century, and transferred to New Amsterdam, and from there to New York, making for the first multi-ethnic New World city, are ubiquitous now. They are part of every modern city, part of the definition of modern society."

I thank New York Times contributor and Amsterdam resident Russel Shorto for summarizing so eloquently.

As I said, we are proud to have contributed and to still contribute to this incredible city, as we are inspired by its dynamic flow and quality of life, even in the hard times we all have to face these days.

I think all of us here realize that - in the end - answers to the major challenges of our times will be found by the creativity in cities, and the cooperation between cities. We strive for 400 years of future cooperation, at least 400 more years exchange of knowledge and progressive ideas. We hope to keep learning from New York, as we hope to share our knowledge with New York and the New Yorkers.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I spoke about the entrepreneurial spirit that the Dutch brought to Manhattan. But please bear in mind that in the early days of the United States representatives came here and could pick up our banking practices. The way Dutch bankers operate is once described by John Adams who later became president of the U.S.A. John Adams was at the time - the year 1782 - the first Ambassador of the U.S.A in the Netherlands and here to arrange a loan for his young country. His wife Abigail stayed at home in America and he wrote her letters to keep her posted. He wrote also about his negotiations with Dutch bankers and I cite:

"I can represent my Situation in this Affair of a Loan, by no other Figure than that of a Man in the midst of the Ocean negotiating for his Life among a School of Sharks. I am sorry to use Expressions which must appear severe to You: but the Truth demands them."

Ladies and gentlemen,

John Adams described Dutch bankers in the 18th century who had money to loan. Nowadays it looks in the international world of finance as if bankers do not have money any more at all. In that regard I heard an explanation from former secretary of Finance Onno Ruding – and former vice-president of the Citibank - about the problem with banking balance sheets:

“On the left side nothing is right and on the right side nothing is left.”

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let us raise the the glass to the American-Dutch Friendship.